

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness month, designated to call attention to this disease and the importance of regular Pap tests. In 2002, 85 new cases of invasive cervical cancer were diagnosed in Kansas women and 35 Kansas women died of this disease. Yet, as a result of early diagnosis through the Pap test, invasive cervical cancer is almost 100 percent preventable.

The Pap test, introduced in the year 1943, is probably the most successful screening tool developed for cancer. Prior to the availability of this test, cervical cancer was the leading cause of cancer death in women in the United States. Now cervical cancer ranks number 14 and accounts for less than one percent of cancer deaths in the U.S.

Deaths from cervical cancer could drop even lower if more women routinely had a Pap test. As cervical cancer produces no symptoms in the early stages, this screening is extremely important. Pap tests, a simple procedure for collecting a sample of cells from a woman's cervix, are administered to 50 million women a year in the U.S. Sixty to 80 percent of invasive cervical cancer cases diagnosed each year occur in women who have not had a Pap test for five years or more. The National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently recommend that women start screening at age 21 or three years following onset of sexual activity, whichever comes first. Regular repeat screening should be conducted as recommended by a woman's medical provider.

In Kansas, the Early Detection Works (EDW) program and the Medicaid program provide cervical cancer screening and treatment for women age 40 to 64 years of age. To be eligible for this program, a woman's income must be no more than 250 percent of the federal poverty level, and she must have either no insurance or insurance with a high, unmet deductible. EDW provides pelvic exams and Pap tests and, if indicated, follow-up services such as biopsies. If diagnosed with cancer, the woman will be referred to Medicaid for appropriate treatment.

Since its origin in October of 1995, Early Detection Works (EDW) has provided Pap tests for 19,531 women in Kansas. In that time, EDW has diagnosed 16 cases of invasive cervical cancer through these tests and identified 435 precancerous conditions in Kansas women which, when treated in a timely manner, were prevented from developing into deadly invasive cancer. When discovered early, the cure rate for cervical cancer is more than 90 percent.

Lack of regular screening increases the risk of finding advanced dysplasia or cervical cancer. The Pap test can detect abnormalities of cervical cells early enough that the condition can be corrected before cancer develops.

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Several factors increase the risk of developing cervical cancer. These risk factors include a history of multiple sex partners, having a partner who has had multiple partners, or having had sexual intercourse prior to age 16. Having multiple sexual partners increases a woman's chance of contracting human papilloma virus (HPV), a sexually transmitted virus that is the foremost risk factor for cancer of the cervix. HPV is very common and does not always lead to cervical cancer.

While there are more than 100 types of HPV, only a few have the potential to cause cancer. Someday a vaccine may protect women against these HPV viruses. Doctors currently believe that up to 90 percent of cervical cancer is caused by the HPV virus.

Additional risk factors for cervical cancer include HIV-AIDS infection or other conditions which compromise the immune system.

Cigarette smoking also increases the risk of cervical cancer. Tobacco has a damaging effect in general on women's reproductive health, including reduced fertility and increased risk of miscarriage, premature birth, stillbirth, and low birth weight in infants.

Studies have associated smoking with precancerous changes (dysplasia) in the cervix and for progression to invasive cervical cancer. It is not clear whether this association is the product of the cancer-causing agents in cigarette smoke or whether smoking impairs the immune system. In one study, carcinogenic substances from tobacco were identified in the cervical cells of women who smoke. Overall, cigarette smoking accounts for at least 30 percent of all cancer deaths, including its role in cervical cancer.

Probably as a result of different screening practices, cervical cancer rates vary significantly among different racial and ethnic groups. The cervical cancer rate for white women is about eight cases per 100,000 U.S. women. For African-American women the cervical cancer rate is about 14 per 100,000 and for Hispanic women about 15 per 100,000. Among Vietnamese women, the cervical cancer rate rises to 43 per 100,000 women. Increased screening followed by appropriate medical treatment for these population groups could lower the rate of invasive cervical cancer.

Worldwide, about 500,000 new cases of cervical cancer are diagnosed yearly. Eighty percent of these cases are in developing countries, where cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer death. Cervical cancer rates are highest in Central America and sub-Saharan Africa. About 280,000 women die of cervical cancer annually. Without treatment, invasive cervical cancer is always fatal.